

## **Search Among The Sunflowers: Episode 3 – All That Remains**

**Narrator:** Before we start, a word of warning that this podcast contains content some people may find distressing. It contains depictions of real-life traumatic events, including commentary around significant injuries and death. This episode contains language that may be offensive for some people and is not suitable for children. Listener discretion is advised.

**David Horder:** My name's David Horder and my parents were Howard and Susan Horder, and they were on board flight MH17 and they were seated in 2K and 2J. Dad was seated on the window seat, and we know this because Mum would always sit on the left hand side of dad, because that was his good ear.

**Narrator:** The story of Brisbane couple Howard and Susan Horder was that of a classic love story.

**David Horder:** Mum and dad were definitely best friends. They always had each other's backs. They were, um, next door neighbours when they were, uh, children, and I think there was one or two houses that separated them when they were kids. And dad was one year older, but yeah, everyone in the street knew each other. And they went to the same high school, but obviously dad was a year ahead. Apparently when they were kids, dad used to throw, uh, rocks at mum, which is what we do when we like someone, right? And I believe dad asked mum to his senior school formal, and then that's how they started dating. And yeah, the rest is history.

**Narrator:** In July 2014, Howard and Susan were enjoying one of the many perks that came with being retirees – having the freedom to travel. It was something they'd always loved doing.

**David Horder:** They were big caravanners, so they were always doing trips and their caravanning never stopped, and was what they were doing right up until they retired. And they always had a beautiful van and a beautiful car.

**Narrator:** On this particular trip, they'd taken advantage of the northern hemisphere summer to explore the UK and Europe, and spend some time with David, one of their three sons.

**David Horder:** I lived in London for 13 years, which is where I was living when the plane was shot down. Those 13 years, they'd come to London and they would visit me and we'd catch up and it was always really, really good.

**Narrator:** A meticulous planner, Howard had been organising and fine-tuning the details of this trip for months.

**David Horder:** Super organised, uh, itinerary, daily budget. Everything was, was, was planned. So, you know, mum and dad, they just, if they were told they've gotta get to the airport three hours before to check in, they would've been there three and a half hours before to check in and would have been the first ones to board. And they would've been super early, super organised, they were on their way home, there was no question that they would um be late for their flights. Yeah, not a possibility.

I can't tell you exactly when but a conversation took place about the fact that dad had booked Malaysian Airlines. And it was obviously after, um, MH370 had disappeared. And I said to him, it's probably the safest airline dad. Like, it's the safest airline. They've, it's, look, it's already happened. What are the chances? The chances are extremely low.

I think it's really important to say, dad always took on the position of looking after mum. Anything to make mum more comfortable. And mum apparently would, like a lot of us, would swell on long haul flights. So, you know, your, your fingers swell, your, we all swell. Dad wanted mum to be comfortable and I know how dad made his decisions. And that would've led to that booking being made for business class on MH17, so that mum would be comfortable. And that has always been, u- upsetting for me because I know that's not what happened. It was as far from a comfortable flight as you could possibly get and that would've devastated my father.

**Narrator:** This is Search Among the Sunflowers, looking for truth in the world's biggest crime scene. It's a story of courage, determination and humanity, and the lifelong connections that can come from tragedy. It's also a story about the unwavering dedication of the Australian Federal Police in pursuit of justice for victims of crime, and the families left behind.

Episode 3.

On July 17, 2014, Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, broke up in mid-air over the Donbas region of Ukraine, and fell to ground not far from the Russian border. On board were 298 passengers and crew, including many Australians. There were no survivors.

Australia's then Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, was among the first to receive the news.

**Julie Bishop:** At first, we were not able to identify how many Australians were on board. That number came to me progressively over the following hours. But the fact that a commercial airplane had been shot down over what was essentially a war zone at that

time, defined as a civil war, was extremely disturbing. But it was a much bigger issue than me of course. So I went into almost autopilot, one step in front of the other, determining what to do that would be in the best interests of the families, the nation and all other nations who'd been affected. So I didn't have time to think about how distressing it was personally. My thoughts were always for those who'd lost their families and loved ones aboard MH17.

**Narrator:** In London, David Horder was having a normal Thursday. Earlier, his mum and dad sent him text messages, letting him know they were about to board their flight in Amsterdam. It was the end of another great holiday, and his parents were eager to get home for their granddaughter's birthday. Those texts were the last he heard from them.

**David Horder:** I actually had that day off on the 17th of July. And, um, I'd gotten up and I went down to Kingston and I did a big food shop at Marks and Spencer. I was living in Surbiton, did the food shop in Kingston. On the bus trip back with my groceries, this is actually something that I, I don't even know if I've ever said to anybody ... I got the weirdest pain in my stomach. Went home, I was sharing with Claire, um, who was just a gorgeous, gorgeous person. She owned the place that I was living in, so I was, um, had one of her rooms.

And she was home. I got home, wasn't feeling great, but I remember that sharp pain. And, I got home, put the groceries away, went into my room, and I remember starting to watch, I think I must have been about a quarter of the way through Melissa McCarthy's movie Identity Thief, <laugh> and a notification came through from a particular news channel saying, Malaysian Airlines, Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, um, has gone missing or has disappeared off the radar, or has, has gone down or, I can't remember the exact... but it was instant. I just knew.

There was never ever a moment for me in my head where they weren't on the plane because I had those text messages. And I remember just the shock of Amsterdam, Kuala Lumpur. I knew they were on that route. I knew they were on Malaysian Airlines, and I knew what time they'd sent those text messages. And I knew where Ukraine was. So for me, it was instant. I went next door to Claire; I turned on the TV and it was already there. And I remember seeing that black cloud of smoke, like jet fuel black, and I just, I was, I just knew. They, I don't think anyone survived that. I pointed to the TV and I said, I think mum and dad, I think mum and dad are on that flight. I think they're gone. I think, yeah, I think we've lost, I think I've lost my parents.

**Narrator:** Far from the rest of his family back in Australia, David immediately picked up the phone to try contacting his brothers, realising he'd be the one who had to break the news.

**David Horder:** My older brother, Matthew, on the Sunshine Coast... I tried the mobile, tried the home number, could not wake them. Keeping in mind it's two, three in the morning in Australia. My younger brother, Adam, who lives in Melbourne, he did answer. And I think in Adam's head he was hoping that it was just me, David, being a bit dramatic, which if you know me could well be the case, but I knew.

**Narrator:** The tough calls didn't end there.

**David Horder:** I rang mum's dad, my grandfather, because I knew that mum always sent him and my older brother the itinerary. And my grandfather answered the phone at, he would've been in his late 80s, maybe even 90s, sorry, still living in the same house that mum grew up in. And mum's mum still there, both of them still alive, still living there. And I said to him, I said, grandpa, I'm really sorry, I think mum and dad are on the plane that's on the news that, MH17 and I, I just need you to have a look at the itinerary, please, and, um, and, and let me know. I said, because I, I think they're on it. I got text messages. He was a very, very pragmatic, man, very matter of fact, David, I will, I will have a look into that. And, um, uh, we said goodbye. He never called back. How could he? He just lost his daughter, at that age, in that circumstance.

Everything just kind of happened, and a flight was booked for me. And you know, I was on my way home the next day and looked after really well. I wanted to get to Ukraine. In my head, I wanted to go to Ukraine. So that obviously didn't happen. A flight was booked for me to come back to Brisbane and be with my brothers and start managing what was an absolute shit fight for the following weeks, months, and years. But obviously at the time I could not comprehend the gravity of the situation.

**Narrator:** In the early days of the MH17 investigation, AFP officers on the ground in Ukraine would uncover numerous small fragments of what they described as 'bow-tie-shaped' material. Material which resembled shrapnel and pointed towards the plane being brought down by a surface-to-air missile.

Running parallel to this collection of evidence was the unenviable collection of another kind: recovering human remains from the crash site and identifying them for their loved ones.

**Narrator:** AFP Inspector and DVI Commander, Rod Anderson, was a Station Sergeant at the time, based in Canberra. With decades of experience up until that point, Rod was deployed to the AFP's Forward Command Post in Eastern Ukraine to oversee the DVI, or Disaster Victim Identification process, including the recovery of bodies from the crash site. It was a role that would prove to be one of the toughest of his career.

**Rod Anderson:** Seeing the train loaded with bodies from the crash site, uh, was shocking. Um, and you know, I, I've been to many sort of disaster scenes before, but I, I've never encountered, that level of, um, despair, I suppose. The bodies on board the four, um, train carriages, were in a pretty bad state. The first carriage that we opened was obviously the last carriage that was packed from the scene. And obviously that was quite shocking. Um, yeah, it was pretty bad, pretty bad.

**Narrator:** From Kharkiv, bodies were transported to a more sophisticated morgue at Hilversum in the Netherlands.

**Rod Anderson:** So the way that the mortuary was set up in Hilversum was very similar to the Christchurch earthquake. It was on a military base, it had almost like production lines. There was proper procedures put in place. And all the internationals that were there were working under the Interpol guidelines. So it made it very clear who was responsible for what, um, what needed to be achieved and how we were gonna achieve that. So that compared to the train and um, all the scenes in the Ukraine, Hilversum was very organised, very as I'd expect to see, um, you know, if that sort of thing happened in Australia or New Zealand.

**Narrator:** In 2014, Dr Simon Walsh was the AFP's Chief Forensic Scientist. Already highly specialised and experienced in DVI, he deployed directly to the Netherlands in the aftermath of the MH17 crash. Dr Walsh had two responsibilities. One was overseeing the collection of forensic evidence as part of the criminal investigation. The other was the identification and repatriation of Australian victims. He'd be working alongside DVI experts and forensic scientists from around the world, tasked with setting up and managing the victim identification process inside Hilversum.

**Simon Walsh:** Those operations are often really large and really complex. So our planning in terms of deployed resources was very much focused on the recovery and what was required at the scene, and then the analysis and what was required in that mortuary phase. By the time I landed, you know the real emphasis for us was gonna be for the victim identification and the investigation work that we could do with our counterparts in the Netherlands.

**Narrator:** Simon arrived in the Netherlands four days after MH17 came down. The bodies from the crash site arrived not long after.

**Simon Walsh:** The remains came back into the Netherlands a little over a week after the incident. So by that stage, you know, there would've been well over 300, 400 specialists already in country. The facility had been completely transformed in order to do the work that was ultimately going to occur there, and the remains had been

repatriated from Ukraine back to the Netherlands, and I think everyone would remember those moments, um, and work was ready to commence.

When the train arrived at the original plant and the body bags were processed, um, you know, we would assign a number, a postmortem number, um, like a barcode to every example or instance of recovered human remains. It might be an intact body or it might not, um, but the mortuary process will then work through all of those recovered remains.

**Narrator:** Identifying remains is a complex process involving many people. It requires a delicate balance of precise attention to detail and considered empathy for loved ones. Getting it right is the only option.

**Simon Walsh:** Identification is certified on the basis of forensic information that can reliably actually provide that identification to the appropriate standard. So we talk about primary identifiers. So in a forensic sense that are records like fingerprints. So if there's an opportunity to recover a finger mark or, or fingerprint detail, ridge detail, as the experts call it, from fingers, hands, even feet, that information can be part of what's relied on for identification, provided we have fingerprint records from a missing person or potential victim that we can use for comparison. Dental information is another primary identifier. So people's dentition, dental work they might have had over the period of their life.

And the third primary identifier is DNA. So if a DNA profile's able to be recovered from a postmortem examination, and that might be from blood or from, uh, swabs that are taken potentially from the mouth of the victim, or it could be from tissue, um, soft tissue or even skeletal remains. So, DNA is very useful in circumstances like MH17 because the remains, you know, can be badly damaged as a consequence of the incident, and indeed, you know, fragmented.

**Narrator:** Connecting DNA profiles with a person's identity often involves having to contact grieving families to request their assistance, at a time when they're still coming to grips with the reality of what's just happened. But in the DVI examination process, it's a critical step.

**Simon Walsh:** Those three types of forensic information, fingerprints, dental, and DNA, are what we call primary identifiers. And that means that they can substantiate an identification on their own. Basically the task of the process is to recover as much as we can and recover anything that we think could be of use. So that might be jewellery, it might be records of surgical intervention. It might be tattoos, scars, marks, other physical features, hair colour, skin colour. And that information can exist as what we'd call a secondary identifier. And in circumstances like this matter, that information can be really relevant as well, particularly in circumstances where there's children amongst the

deceased, 'cause often children haven't had a lot of dental work and won't likely be on a fingerprint database somewhere. And so some of those opportunities to use primary identifiers don't exist as readily for children. And when you have children and family groups, then some of the secondary identifiers can be really important. And in a disaster like this, with the scale of it and the nature of it, a lot of detailed work was done to investigate all of the information, including a lot of that secondary information.

In terms of the overall incident, out of the 298 victims, 296 were formally identified. And there were two victims, um, from the Netherlands who we never located their remains. And the Dutch, um, you know, had to draw a close formally to the operation, but they do continue to try and work on that issue to see if they can find any way to have a formal identification for those two members.

From an Australian perspective, we were trying to identify 41 of the victims. So there were 38 who were either Australian citizens or residents of Australia, and there were another three who were resident in Australia at the time of the incident that we had some responsibility to support their identification as well, in partnership with their home country.

**Narrator:** For Australian families and the loved ones of those on board MH17, the identification process was heartbreakingly long. But it was so important to get it right. Care and respect were paramount when it came to the AFP updating next of kin with the information they needed. It was a responsibility felt across the entire organisation and halfway across the world.

**Brian McDonald:** There was a great sense of representing the Australian families. We've all got families. I could think of nothing worse than thinking a family member of mine was still lying somewhere in the crash site. We didn't know what we didn't know. So to give them some level of satisfaction that we've searched the crash site, any body parts that were there we've been able to take.

Secondary to that also is, you that terrible feeling is that if we weren't able to identify all of the victims, I don't think that's gonna give closure to everybody either. And we were lucky enough that we actually collected enough material that we were able to identify all of the people that we believed to be on the flight. And so all of the victims could be laid to rest, but also give closure to the families. And I think that was probably the biggest driving factor, certainly for me, and that, you know, that time I picked up the paperwork, that just reinforced exactly primarily what it was that we were doing and why we were there.

**Narrator:** A little under three weeks after the AFP first arrived at the MH17 crash site, tensions were starting to resurface among the Russia-backed separatists patrolling the

area. As Sir Angus Houston recalls, their presence wasn't just challenging – it was dangerous.

**Sir Angus Houston:** The situation on the crash site started to deteriorate because it was clear that the, um, separatists were getting very edgy, and it looked like there was going to be some sort of, uh, military maneuvering on the crash site. So the separatists wanted to dig in, in the area where we were actually, uh, excavating for human remains. Essentially, the situation eventually became untenable when one, uh, element went in and they went towards the flight deck, the wreckage of the flight deck 'cause they wanted to have a look at it. And, uh, they were warned off. And the way they were warned off was a mortar was fired, and the mortar fired reasonably close to them, close enough for them to dive into a ditch. It was quite clear that if they were prepared to fire warning shots with mortars, our presence on the crash site was becoming increasingly risky and uh we pulled out of there at that time.

It was probably a total of ten or so good days doing the work. But in terms of the results that were achieved, we were able to, um, find the remains of all the Australians that were on the aircraft, and indeed all the remains of most of the rest of the passengers and crew.

**Brian McDonald:** And we were lucky enough that the planning that had taken place, we hadn't overburdened ourselves. So as soon as they got back from the crash site, as soon as they got to the forward command, straight on the buses and straight to Kharkiv. So we were able to get them out relatively quickly.

The Dutch didn't quite have the same level of comfort because they had put more people in there, but they eventually managed to get all their people out as well. And now bearing in mind the comms were pretty difficult anyway. We were operating on open source, on phones, a whole variety of things, but they just went dark and uh, we've gone, hmm, that's a pretty good message.

**Narrator:** With the AFP needing to withdraw from the crash site, attention now turned to the victim identification process happening in Hilversum.

Next of kin were desperate for information...and confirmation that their loved ones would be coming home, complete or otherwise. To help with this, Australian families were connected with the AFP's FILO team. When an Australian is harmed or killed overseas, the FILOs – or Family Investigative Liaison Officers – act as a conduit between investigators, forensic experts like Dr Simon Walsh, and the victims' families. Part of the FILO role is to navigate some emotionally difficult conversations with families about their loved ones remains.



**Simon Walsh:** There's some important issues that need to be discussed and decided both formally, but also importantly with families as well. So one of the things that our family investigative liaison officers do in this circumstance and why they're so critical is they provide a bit of a bridge to what we're trying to do and the work we're doing operationally. And through our forensic and victim identification processes, help the families to firstly understand what's happening, have a appreciation of the type of work that is going on, and why it's necessary. Uh, obviously, ways in which the family can contribute and support that work through the collection of the antemortem information, including information from themselves and information they can provide about their missing loved one. But also to speak to them about some of the considerations that, you know, we'd appreciate their input on, with respect to decisions about their loved ones, that might be necessary to make in the context of an investigation or an operation like this.

So those sorts of decisions can be, for example when our team have made an identification that relates to, you know, one of your missing loved ones or your missing loved one, would you like to be notified at that stage, because it could be that subsequent examinations will recover other remains that are also identified as your missing loved one. Would you prefer to wait, um, until such time those examinations are complete or would you prefer to know at the first opportunity, um, but it's important that the families are involved in the downstream considerations as to when they would wish to be notified and what they would wish to do with their loved ones remains. So, those discussions and the family's decisions have a real bearing on how we proceed in those circumstances. But overall, our objective is to identify all of the recovered remains, and return them, uh, to their family members and to their communities.

**Narrator:** Making sense of something so incomprehensible is part of why Dr Simon Walsh does what he does. While they can never replace what's lost, connecting loved ones with even the smallest fragments of reliable information can be comforting to have in a time of turmoil.

**Simon Walsh:** We have an opportunity and a responsibility to go and start to do something that begins the process of resolution, even just bringing back some information that can be relied upon.

Clarifying for someone whether or not their loved one has been involved and what the outcome for them is gonna be. Helping them to the formal pathways that will allow them then to recover and inter their loved one's remains. That's our role in this. We don't stop to think about the confronting nature of it. In many circumstances, we don't find it as confronting as lay people would because people are very focused on the job they're

there to do and they are very motivated by the fact that they're in that position and they can actually do something constructive about that.

**Rod Anderson:** It is really pleasing, though, to know that we've done everything possible to identify the remains and return them to their loved ones. And it's satisfying to know that they get a little bit of comfort from that. I never use the term closure because I don't think... well, we can never give people closure after a disaster like these. But we can certainly bring a little bit of comfort to the families to know that everything had been done to meet their needs, and as much as possible. We can't bring 'em back, but we can make it as, as comfortable and easy for them as we can.

**Narrator:** The complex, difficult work done by DVI experts, like Rod Anderson and Dr Simon Walsh, doesn't repair the emotional damage from a tragedy like MH17. But with care, consideration and time, it can be a powerful tool on the journey through grief and remembrance.

**David Horder:** There's some really dark memories, but I, I think the one for me that's the most special, was getting them home. So seeing the Australian military personnel escort my parents, the coffins were draped in Australian flags and placed into the hearses, and for us to watch that and the respect that they were given and the love they were given and, and then we were able to go and walk up to the coffins and welcome them home. And just the gravity of mum and dad being there next to each other with the Australian flags over them and the journey they'd been on to get into Melbourne, was quite mind blowing. And that's a real, a real highlight. It's like we got them home, they're home, they're safe. And they were just treated so beautifully and with so much respect. And I think the moment that they got to the Netherlands, they were finally given some respect and dignity that they were not shown, um, at 33,000 feet or on the ground in Ukraine.

**Narrator:** Recovering and identifying the victims of MH17 was first and foremost what the AFP had always set out to do. But it was only part of their mission. With their collective skillset as forensic investigators, it was only natural that collection of evidence, and analysis of that evidence for use in a possible criminal trial, would complete the circle.

**Simon Walsh:** The images of the signature shrapnel fragments, these bow tie fragments. When I saw them, and it was one of the first days of the mortuary operation, being able to say to my Dutch counterparts, this is what we're looking for, this is what we're looking for.

**Gerrit Thiry:** The first time that we got pieces of, uh, the weapon, so that we knew that MH17 was shot down with a Buk missile, that was a moment of happiness, of course, for us.

**Simon Walsh:** They dropped one of those fragments into my hand, and they're like, we've got 'em.

**Narrator:** If the content in this podcast has caused you to experience any mental health concerns, a range of support is available.

For immediate help, please call triple zero.

You can also call Lifeline on 13 11 14 – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Australian Police Officers and other emergency workers can also seek assistance from support services available within their organisation, or from the National Emergency Worker Support Service.

You can learn more about this service at [blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://blackdoginstitute.org.au).

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